

Statement for the Record before the

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on House Administration

Hearing Title: Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution: Opportunities for Growth by Honoring Latino Americans and Asian Pacific Americans

Robert Menendez
United States Senator

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Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing on the opportunities to grow the Smithsonian Institution by honoring Latino and Asian Pacific Americans. As the lead sponsor of S. 1267, the “National Museum of the American Latino Act” in the Senate, I firmly believe that it’s time that Hispanic Americans get their own world-class museum on the National Mall, built and administered to the standards that only the Smithsonian Institution can uphold.

This is not a partisan issue. In 2008, Congress with the support of Republican President George W. Bush, created the Commission to Study the Potential Creation of the National Museum of the American Latino. Later in 2011, the National Museum of the American Latino Commission submitted a plan of action to Democratic President Barack Obama and to Congress. Now is the time for this Congress to take that plan and turn it into action.

It is hard to believe that in the year 2020, a museum devoted to Latino history does not already exist in the nation’s capital. From day one, Hispanics have shaped this nation in countless ways – as military leaders, as pioneers in business and the arts, as activists and elected officials. Yet, the history and contributions of Hispanic Americans to the United States since its inception have been at-best overlooked and at-worst, erased.

The effort to build the National Museum of the American Latino should not be controversial, because no one can deny that at nearly 60 million strong Latino Americans will continue to shape America’s future, just as we have shaped America’s past.

Half-a-century before English speaking colonies were settled in Jamestown, Virginia, Spanish was being spoken in a settlement established in St. Augustine, Florida. Almost a century before that, Columbus had already begun the colonization of Puerto Rico, which would become a part of the United States 400 years later. In 1821, the Kingdom of New Mexico, which encompassed what, would ultimately become the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah, was the most densely populated place in Northern Mexico.¹ However, when our nation’s children read

¹ Gutierrez, R. (2013) The Latino crucible: Its origins in 19th century wars, revolutions, and empire. *In American Latinos and the making of the United States: A theme study*. Washington DC: National Park System Advisory Board.

their assigned American history textbooks, the presence of Latinos in the United States during these pivotal moments is missing. As noted by historian Ramon Gutierrez, when told through the optic of American victories in pivotal conflicts such as the Texas Revolution, the U.S.-Mexico War and the Spanish-American War, Latino presence, participation and contributions to the birth of this nation are all but absent.² In fact the *origins* of Latino presence in the United States have little to-do with economic migration, as many would believe today, and more to-do with American imperial expansion which integrated Latino occupied territories.

In school, we were never taught about Bernardo de Galvez, the Spanish Colonel of the Louisiana Regiment in New Orleans, who thwarted every British advance in the area thus helping the army of General George Washington during the American Revolutionary War. Nor were we taught that Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, one of the “Fathers of Black History” in the United States, was an Afro-Latino born in Santurce, Puerto Rico,³ nor that Dr. Ellen Ochoa was the first Mexican-American woman to travel to space and later become Director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center.

These are but a fraction of the numerous examples of galleries and exhibitions a Smithsonian National Museum for the American Latino could house for the millions of visitors from all over the world to learn about. The Museum of the American Latino will inspire families, tourists, students and people from all backgrounds to celebrate the diverse threads that bind the United States of America together as one nation.

Instead, Hispanic children and adults will have to wait until 2021 for the Smithsonian Institution to open a small gallery in the National Museum of American History to see themselves permanently reflected amongst the stories told by America’s museum. Moreover, this exhibition was only made possible by a generous private contribution. It’s time for Congress to correct this mistake, pass legislation to create the Museum and allow the Smithsonian to begin the planning process towards building another world-renowned destination in our nation’s capital that celebrates the incredible history and contributions of Latino Americans to make America great.

Once again, I thank the Committee for discussing the importance of this legislation, and I look forward to seeing H.R. 2420 pass the House of Representatives and brought to the Senate.

² Ibid

³ Latino USA (June 30, 2017). One of the fathers of black history was Afro-Puerto Rican. Accessed online at <https://www.npr.org/2017/06/30/535046369/the-father-of-black-history-was-afro-puerto-rican>